

CONSERVATION *Showcase*



Retired Conservationist's Career Continues On His Own Farm

Laura Greiner, Public Affairs Specialist, June 2011

Raised a conservationist, Bob Torgerson, 77, of Humboldt, was destined to be a good steward of his own farm. But a twist of fate, when Torgerson was just a teenager, allowed his conservation ethic to impact many more farms than just his own.

"I was 18, and just out of high school, when my father died suddenly of a heart attack," Torgerson said. "I had planned to farm together with my dad on some ground we were going to rent and I couldn't do that anymore after the farm was rented to someone else."

Torgerson would eventually buy his own farm; but not for another 50 years.

The Bode, Iowa, native took a carpentry job after his father's death. After a year or so, Torgerson's brother-in-law told him about a federal job with the Soil Conservation Service in the Humboldt Field Office.

"I was raised on the farm so this was a good opportunity for me to stay as close to farming as I could," he said.

The son of the first farmer to sign a conservation plan in Humboldt County was now helping other farmers implement their own conservation plans. After five years, he was transferred to the Hampton Field Office in 1967, working as a full-time federal employee until retiring in 1994. After his federal retirement, he worked as a part-time state and district employee for 15 more years in Franklin and Humboldt counties. He "totally retired" in 2008. During his 46-year soil conservation career, Torgerson helped hundreds of farmers protect soil and water with terraces, grassed waterways, buffers and many other practices.

"I think terraces are my favorite practice," he said. "They seem to control more erosion than anything else. They really help keep soil out of the rivers and streams."



Bob Torgerson

A born conservationist, Torgerson also has a bit of salesman in him. "I enjoyed visiting with farmers. After talking with them I would sometimes try to get them to do things a little differently, in a way that would do a better job of taking care of things," he said.

Paul Vondra, resource conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Butler County, witnessed Torgerson's selling skills and great conservation instincts when Vondra joined the agency in 1997 as a soil conservation technician.

"He (Torgerson) was great working with the farmers, explaining the importance of terraces and other practices and helping them understand how they stop erosion. He was very good at working with farmers, county officials and other partners," said Vondra.

Torgerson taught the young Vondra the basics of conservation work: working with farmers, laying out terraces and other practices and designing a system of practices that best fits the landscape.

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“Some of my most worthwhile skills came from him,” said Vondra. “He showed me the nuts and bolts of conservation and was always patient and had a good sense of humor. Bob is just an overall good guy.”

And their friendship continued even after Vondra moved on to other positions. The two exchange Christmas cards occasionally. In one of them, Vondra expressed his gratitude for Torgerson’s guidance and help he provided the young conservationist.

Through his nearly 50 years in the conservation field, Torgerson received several awards from NRCS and local soil and water conservation districts. But one of his most prized tokens of appreciation is that special Christmas card signed by his friend Paul Vondra.

“I really enjoyed helping out young people and teaching them about conservation,” said Torgerson. And according to his wife Marilyn, people still call on Bob for his advice and to ask questions about resource concerns on farms he used to visit while working as a soil conservation technician.

Vondra is just one of many NRCS employees who began their careers as soil conservation technicians. But he is one of the lucky ones fortunate enough to begin that career under the guidance of Bob Torgerson.

ON THE SIDE

Torgerson’s Farm: Home Away From Home

As a former soil conservation technician, Bob Torgerson is one of Humboldt County NRCS’s best customers. He designed his own terraces, and even helped lay them out. He understands the conservation value of every practice on his 75-acre farm.

Since purchasing the farm in 2004, Torgerson has installed about \$70,000 worth of terraces, grassed waterways, contour buffer strips and wetlands.



Torgerson’s farm includes four kinds of terraces, including this narrow base terrace installed last year.

His farm features four types of terraces: grassback, broadbase, narrowbase and a diversion at the base to redirect runoff from some woodlands. All together his farm includes 4,270 feet of terraces. About 29 acres of the farm are enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program.

His tenant follows a hay and corn rotation and practices conservation tillage and contour farming.

Torgerson said he makes the two-mile drive to visit his farm nearly every day, spending about 15 hours a week mowing, walking the terraces, and watering trees at his family’s 1.4 acre park which is in the northwest corner of the farm.

None of Torgerson’s four children farm, but they all come home to enjoy the park together—especially the five grandsons.

“We all come and picnic and enjoy the trees,” said Torgerson. “The farm is really just part of our family.”